



What counts as evidence for policy?

Overview

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the refrain of ‘following the science’ became commonplace. But **what is meant by evidence can vary according to who is asked, the context, and other factors**. We conducted research to analyse the perceptions of Welsh policy actors towards evidence. These perceptions matter because they will impact why evidence is used or not by different policy actors and ultimately on how policy is formulated.

To undertake this research, we used Q methodology - which is a mixed method developed to study attitudes and perceptions of individuals. It involves participants ranking a set of statements on what evidence is and its role in policy making. These statements were collected from the existing literature, newspapers, and expert interviews. When meeting virtually (because of the Covid-19 pandemic), each participant was asked to rank the statements in an agree-to-disagree pyramid shape (+4 to -4); take a photograph of the final sorted statements; and complete a short questionnaire about their views on evidence.

We conducted interviews with 34 participants from across the Welsh policy community, from **Ministers to civil servants, Senedd staff, as well as civil society organisations, and academics**, to discuss their perceptions of evidence for policy.



Key findings

Our results reveal four profiles of perceptions and attitudes towards evidence in policy making in Wales: Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) Idealists, Political, Pragmatists, and Inclusive.

EBPM Idealists	<p>Key statements agree with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence must be rigorous, clear, and well-presented (+4) • Policy makers have a responsibility to use evidence in an impartial way (+4) <p>Key quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As [Welsh Government] officials, our job is to tell the truth. You must always give an honest representation of the facts.” • “RCTs are useful but I don’t think that they are the gold standard.”
Political	<p>Key statements agreed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some types of evidence are considered more valid than others (+3) • Evidence is political in the way it is articulated (+2) • What counts as evidence reflects power relations (+2) <p>Key quote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The kind of evidence that they [i.e. politicians] value might be different from party to party...we can’t be completely impartial.”
Pragmatists	<p>Key statements agreed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all evidence can be measured (+4) • What counts as evidence varies between professions (+4) <p>Key quote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Having been in the policy process and received various sources of evidence, I don’t think I have ever felt that I can deduce a course of action easily from the evidence. There is always judgement involved.”
Inclusive	<p>Key statements agreed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence is anything that helps draw a rich picture of an issue (+4) • Evidence should be systematically generated from a wide range of studies (+4) • Evidence is what helps to answer a policy question (+3) <p>Key quote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Anything that will give you that rich picture of a policy area if very useful evidence, regardless of how it is obtained.

EBPM Idealists

These respondents believe that evidence ought to be rigorous, clear, and well-presented (ranked +4) and that policy makers have a responsibility to use evidence in an impartial way (+4). For these respondents, evidence could be likened to truth and facts:

“As officials our job is to tell the truth. You must always give an honest representation of the facts.”

These respondents were not, however, fully wedded to the principles of EBPM, for instance making it clear that RCTs (Randomised Control Trials) “*are useful but I don’t think that they are the gold standard*”. Such observations highlighted how, **while they subscribed to the general ideas of EBPM, this needed to be interpreted within the real world of policy**. Classic EBPM principles such as quantitative evidence being the most important type of evidence (-2), and evidence being what can be counted and measured (-1) were not ranked positively by this profile.

All participants in this profile had Masters or higher degrees, with most of them working in government (local or national) or the Senedd. They tended to have a varied professional background, although academia dominated.

Political

These respondents believe that what counts as evidence is influenced by politics. They agreed that ‘evidence is always contested’ (+2), that ‘evidence is political in the way it is articulated’ (+2), and that ‘evidence reflects power relations’ (+2); which these respondents ranked higher than any other of the profiles. This profile also stressed the difficulties of determining what counts as evidence, with ‘the sum of evidence on a particular topic is necessarily complex’ (+3) and ‘there isn’t always clear evidence over what works on an issue’ (+4) being ranked highly.

The Political respondents didn’t deny all aspects of EBPM. For instance, one participant explained how they agreed with the statement that policy makers have a responsibility to use evidence in an impartial way, but recognised that they serve political masters with a certain political bent.

“The kind of evidence that they [i.e., ministers] value might be different from party to party [...] We can’t be completely impartial”.

The participants included in this profile were spread across organisations, with their educational level varying from degree to PhD and their professional background spanning charity, academia, and policy.

Pragmatists

These respondents believe that the answer to ‘what counts as evidence’ will vary according to the different factors involved in a particular context. This transpires through the two statements that they most agreed with: ‘not all evidence can be measured’ (+4) and ‘what counts as evidence varies between professions’ (+4). Although this profile combined attitudes and perceptions from both the EBPM and Political profiles, it leaned more towards the latter. For instance, Pragmatists agreed more with statements such as ‘evidence is what policy officials and Ministers see as acceptable’ (0) and ‘who decides what counts as evidence is important’ (+3), ranking them higher than any other of the profiles.

Pragmatists illustrate the difficulty of working with evidence, with the evaluation of the quality of the evidence being difficult (+3), how not all evidence can be measured (+4), and how there isn’t always clear evidence about what works on an issue (+2). One Pragmatist’s quote epitomises this profile:

“Having been in the policy process and received various sources of evidence, I don’t think I have ever felt that I can deduce a course of action easily from the evidence. There is always judgement involved.”

Pragmatists were spread across organisations, with different levels of education and a wide variation in professional backgrounds.

Inclusive

This profile includes participants who believe that what counts as evidence should be as broad and open as possible, with ‘evidence [being] anything that helps draw a rich picture of an issue’ (+4), ‘evidence being any observation that supports a proposition’ (+1), and ‘evidence being what helps to answer a policy question’ (+3) all being ranked higher than in any other profile. One respondent illustrates this viewpoint:

“I was a policymaker for forty years so anything that will give you that rich picture of a policy area is very useful evidence, regardless of how it is obtained.”

The Inclusive respondents agreed that evidence should be systematically drawn from a wide range of study (+4) and evidence was seen as offering objective solutions to political problems (+3), as both statements ranked high. This profile stressed *“the need for a broad spectrum of evidence, the need for different methods to get a full picture.”* They disagreed that evidence is what policy officials and Ministers see as acceptable (-3) – *“I agree this is what happens, but it should not be the case”* – evidence reflecting power relations (-2) or who decides what counts as evidence being important (-2). Overall, this profile emphasised the need for evidence to include a wide arsenal of tools, methods, and elements.

Those identifying with this profile tended to work for the Welsh Government, with the dominant professional background being policy.

Cross-profile comparisons

Our study illustrates how **our respondents’ views of evidence are contextual, nuanced and variable**. For instance, focusing on those statements that ranked similarly across the four profiles – all agreed that it was important to explain what we mean by evidence (ranked either +1 or +2). Each profile disagreed that all evidence in the policy process is equal (ranked -3 in all profiles). The fact that everybody also disagreed that ‘evidence is a luxury nowadays’ (ranked -2 to -4) and ‘evidence is just a box that needs ticking for policy-makers’ (ranked -1 to -4) also suggests that **most of our participants reject that evidence is a performance or add-on in Welsh policymaking**.

The EBPM Idealist profile included the greatest number of higher degree qualifications. This could suggest a **correlation between length of time spent in academic training and a stronger belief in EBPM ideas** (at least in this study). Contrastingly, when comparing length of service across profiles, the Inclusive (15 years) and the Pragmatist (11 years) profiles included the longest time spent working compared with the Political and EBPM Idealist (8 years) profiles. This could suggest that **the longer time one spends dealing with evidence questions in the ‘real world’, the more inclined you will be to have a varied and contextual understanding of evidence**.

Conclusion

Our research aimed to improve understanding of what evidence means to different policy actors in Wales. Using Q methodology, our study provides a way of researching how policy actors think about evidence. We have found how **similar behaviours towards evidence may be garnered in different organisations, whilst opposite viewpoints – e.g., EBPM idealists versus Political – may cohabitate in the same organisation – e.g. the Welsh Government**.

The EBPM Idealist type includes the most respondents (12) but it doesn't dominate, with a greater number of respondents (15) being distributed across the three other profiles. This emphasises how varied policy actors' attitudes towards evidence are. We also found that **all participants agreed that their understanding of evidence had changed over time.**

What are the lessons from the research? For organisations involved in policy, it is important to recognise that **different actors have different perceptions of evidence, and they could use our findings to think about how different meanings of evidence may impact their work.** For those involved in knowledge brokering (such as 'What Works Centres'), it is important to understand how policy makers, who they are trying to influence, determine what counts as evidence. Our results suggest that most policy makers see evidence as being only one of several factors that influence the decision-making process. Finally, evidence providers (such as researchers and academics) need to understand whether and how policy actors may be open to evidence, whether they are EBPM Idealists who will only heed certain forms of evidence, or Pragmatists/Inclusive, who are working in a context and on an issue which they see as amenable to evidence.

This study reports the findings from the Welsh policy community. We are currently conducting this study in Scotland and at the local level in Wales to see if perceptions towards evidence vary according to context.

Further information

This study was conducted as part of the Wales Centre for Public Policy's research programme on evidence use and effective policy making, funded by Cardiff University, and is distinct from the Centre's work for Welsh Government Ministers and public services.

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

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For further information contact:

Eleanor MacKillop

eleanor.mackillop@wcpp.org.uk

James Downe

james.downe@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, Sbarc/Spark, Maindy Road, Cardiff CF24 4HQ

 www.wcpp.org.uk

 029 2087 5345

 info@wcpp.org.uk

 @WCfPP

